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Polygraphs Vs. Rights

A congressional subcommittee investigating the proliferation of lie detector tests has produced enough evidence of abuse to demand corrective measures for the protection of individual rights.

In numbrs alone there is cause for alarm. In fiscal 1963, some 19 federal agencies, exclusive of the supersecret CIA, conducted 23,122 lie detector tests — some merely to determine suitability for employment. In 1959, the Air Force used lie detectors in one out of 43 investigations. Five years later the ratio was one in 18.

Further, the military services concede they have added hidden microphones and see-through mirrors as standard equipment in their inquisitorial chambers.

The qualifications of those who conduct the tests also leave much to be desired. Prof. Fred Imbau of Northwestern University's Law School testified he considers four out of five polygraph operators in the U. S. to be improperly qualified. At least partial substantiation appears in the fact that the Army trains its operators in seven weeks.

Lie detection equipment itself is considered no more than 70 per cent reliable since it cannot distinguish between the emotional reactions to a lie and certain anxieties of the innocent. Lie detector results are not admissible evidence in court. Yet they are permitted to influence the hiring of government personnel, stain reputations and damage careers.

The extent that they do so has been a fruitful source of investigation. It is incumbent upon the congressional subcommittee to follow through to the point where proper safeguards against the invasion of human rights are provided.

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